San Francisco Chronicle

The Largest Daily Circulation in Northern California

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 9, 1986

'Type O'

After the old-fashioned dramaturgy of "The Artful Lodgers," what a pleasure it was the following night to take in a show that exemplifies the Bay Area's fascinating penchant for theatrical experimentation.

It's called "Type O" and, while its script has plenty of problems, it errs on the side of trying something new and exciting. In this case, it's a blend of Eastern and Western theater and musical forms, and Asian-American and Afro-American performers.

The talented four-member troupe is composed of two excellent jazz musicians (bassist Mark Izu, saxophonist Lewis Jordan) and two Noh- and Kyogen-trained actors (Brenda Aoki, Sachiko Nakamura).

The comical story, such as it is, has to do with how and why Nakamura's character — who is influenced by punk rock, rap songs and sexy dancing — as a child killed her Japanese heritage-pushing grandma, and then later how and why she wound up killing her sensei (Noh guardian). It's all guilt-trip imagination, of course.

The hour-long piece, directed with great imagination by Jael Weisman, unfolds in flashbacks that often are witty and satirical. There's one scene in the Zen Baptist temple, for example, where members of the congregation clap with one hand. Now *that's* funny.

The script tends to meander, but the performers are ingratiating, Lydia Tanji's costumes and properties are clever (her wig for a judge, composed of pink hair curlers, is a gas), and the music, for the most part composed by Izu and Jordan, is an important contribution to the solidity of the piece.

It plays at 8:30 p.m. Thursdays through Saturdays, through September 20, at Studio Eremos, 499 Alabama Street. It then moves, October 2-11, to the Ohana Cultural Center, 4345 Telegraph Avenue, Oakland.

CURTAIN CALLS

BERNARD WEINER

CLUB SPOTLIGHT

SoundSeen gives cabaret offbeat twist with 'Type O'

By Doris G. Worsham
The Tribune

Since its inception in 1984, SoundSeen, a multitalented, collaborative ensemble, has become a mainstay of the Bay Area cabaret circuit with offbeat works that incorporate Eastern and Western performance traditions, including Noh and Kyogen Japanese theater techniques, dance and jazz.

"When we started the group, one of our main tenets was to combine dance, music and theater and attempt to create a new art form" said Brenda Wong Aoki, one of Soundseen's founding members and a Noh and Kyogen-trained actress, dancer and choreographer.

Last August, SoundSeen premiered its newest work, "Type O," at San Francisco's Studio Eremos. "Type O" is described as a new performance cabaret comedy about a woman seeking satori (enlightenment).

"This piece is organic . . . we've been rehearsing it for 10 months and watching it grow," Aoki explained. "It's a story about a person's search for self-understanding."

This weekend, "Type O" moves to the Ohana Cultural Center, 4345 Telegraph Ave., Oakland, with performances tonight and tomorrow and next Thursday, Friday and Saturday.

Showtimes are 8:30 tonight and 8:30 and 10 tomorrow night. Tickets are $7 in advance and $8 at the door, and are on sale at Ticketron. Phone 848-3180.

"Type O" isn't just any ordinary cabaret comedy. Here's a sample of the comedy's unusual storyline:

Sachiko, the play's leading character, is sentenced to "life on probation" for killing her grandmother.

She rebels against her probation and decapitates her Noh guardian.

In her quest for satori, Sachiko recalls the Zen Baptist church meetings of her past and her iconoclastic childhood with her traditional Japanese grandmother.

In addition to Aoki, SoundSeen also consists of actress-dancer-choreographer Sachiko Nakamura, also schooled in Noh and Kyogen techniques, and bassist Mark Izu and alto saxophonist Lewis Jordan, both members of the respected Bay Area jazz group United Front.

"Type O" is directed by Obie Award-winning director Jael Weisman, a founding member of Dell'Arte Players Company and a former member of the San Francisco Mime Troupe. The costumes were designed by Lydia Tanji, winner of two Bay Area Theater Critics Awards for costume designs.

SoundSeen has worked together informally since 1979, first in Jordan's "Music-At-Large" series, and later in the 1984 performance piece, "The Land of Oohs and Aahs."

"Lewis, Mark, Sachiko and I conceptually think the same and philosophically we are in sync," said Aoki. "We always try to present the unexpected."

Jordan wrote the majority of the dialogue for "Type O" and composed much of the music. "I tried to come up with dialogue and words that were fun and a challenge," said Jordan. "There's one character who's a Zen Baptist preacher, a character that I've been thinking about for a long time. I play the Zen Baptist preacher and a Sonoma Vice officer. I'm the Tubbs of Sonoma."

In "Type O," Nakamura portrays Sachiko, the central character; Aoki portrays Sachiko's doomed grandmother and other supporting roles; Izu is featured as a judge and street musician, and Jordan is also cast as a satori soldier.

By Roo Riesterer/The Tribune

Brenda Aoki, Lewis Jordan are part of the search for enlightenment in SoundSeen's 'Type O.'

San Francisco Examiner
Thursday, September 4, 1986

Gentle satire of Japanese theater

By Scott Rosenberg
EXAMINER THEATER CRITIC

A MOURNFUL-LOOKING woman kneels at center stage, wearing a convict's number across her chest. Three performers, with lightning-bolts across their black T-shirts and reflecting superhero helmets on their heads, stand behind her in a line, chanting.

"Woe is she."

"Type O," the performance piece that begins in this engagingly flip fashion and is presented by the SoundSeen collaborative at Studio Eremos, is a cross-cultural exploration — a sort of jazz/Noh cabaret — but without the avant-garde high seriousness that often makes such experiments go haywire.

The woman is Sachiko, a rebellious Japanese girl, and the others are "satori-soldiers." They appear at the moment of Sachiko's death to review her past; then they confer enlightenment upon her, driving a pink arrow through the side of her head.

Most of "Type O" is flashback, recording how Sachiko rebelled against her "Zen Baptist" roots, drove her grandmother to a not-so-early grave and then beheaded her Noh teacher. For the death of granny, the girl is sentenced to "life on probation": She's saddled with her Noh guardian and ordered not to consort with street musicians.

This peculiar prohibition has the arbitrariness of fable logic; naturally, Sachiko must break it. The musicians whose influence she falls under tell her, "A Noh guardian? You need a *yes* guardian!"

The members of SoundSeen take the gestural vocabulary of Oriental theater, put it in comic-book balloons, and set it to some free-flowing sax and string-bass music. The result is an amusingly unpredictable and nicely unpretentious piece that gently satirizes Japanese reverence for tradition while drawing freely — and skillfully — from the culture's stage traditions.

While Sachiko Nakamura and Brenda Wong Aoki enact the scenes of Sachiko's descent into modest vice, musicians Lewis Jordan and Mark Izu — clad in black like traditional Noh stagehands — keep up a running, interactive commentary on the action, and occasionally get directly involved.

"Type O" is directed by San Francisco Mime Troupe veteran Jael Weisman, and the performance has a unique feel: The stylized discipline of classical Noh theater regularly disintegrates into jazz improv. The synthesis becomes overt when Sachiko's Noh master, putting her through a grueling workout of physical training, finally calls a break with a casual "take five."

The members of SoundSeen make fun of the jargon of enlightenment — there's much talk of "gateless gates" and many illustrations of the sound of one-hand clapping. At the same time, they keep their own sympathy with liberation of various kinds clear — too clear, in some of the lyrics (the final chorus sings "glory to the spirit of rebellion").

More often, though, the show's tongue is just far enough in its cheek to tickle. State the satori soldiers: "We deal with enlightenment. (Pause.) We are full of it."

"Type O" plays Thursday through Saturday at 8:30 p.m. through Sept. 20 at Studio Eremos (552-3541) and on the same schedule Oct. 2 through 11 at the Ohana Cultural Center in Oakland (848-3180).

From left: Mark Izu, Sachiko Nakamura, Brenda Wong Aoki and Lewis Jordan in 'Type O'

THEATER REVIEW
'Type O'
By SoundSeen
Director: Jael Weisman
Cast: Brenda Wong Aoki, Sachiko Nakamura
Theater: Studio Eremos
Evaluation: ★ ★ ★

EXPRESS
THE EAST BAY'S FREE WEEKLY

Friday, October 3, 1986 Volume 8, Number 52

The Story of O

TYPE O. By Brenda Aoki, Mark Izu, Lewis Jordan, and Sachiko Nakamura. Directed by Jael Weisman. SoundSeen, Ohana Cultural Center, 4345 Telegraph, Oakland. Through October 11.

By Robert Hurwitt

Last spring I did a short piece for *Callboard*, the trade magazine for Bay Area theater workers, on the current state of experimental theater hereabouts as part of an issue devoted to a general survey of the state of theater arts in the area. Now this is a subject on which I confess to be pretty unabashedly bullish, and I think for good reason. The Bay Area is host to one of the richest and most diverse experimental theater scenes in the world today. But in this particular essay I chose to focus on some comments made to me recently, and on separate occasions, by two of our leading experimentalists, Chris Hardman, co-founder of Snake Theater and founder of Antenna, and Ellen Sebastian, now joined with Leonard Pitt and Bill Talen in the San Francisco venture, Life on the Water. Where, both Hardman and Sebastian wondered, is the next generation? As fresh and innovative as their work continues to be, why do we so rarely hear of any new work in the field besides that of Hardman, Sebastian, George Coates, Laura Farabough, Nightletter, Soon 3, the Blake Street Hawkeyes, Ruth Zaporah, Gulf of the Farallones, and the rest of the first and second waves of the Bay Area avant garde? Where are the new voices?

No sooner had the article appeared, as any fool should have been able to predict, than I started to hear from fresh and would-be innovative voices all over the place, some of which actually turned out to be engaged in interesting new approaches to the ancient art. One of the freshest and certainly the funniest of these voices belonged to a group called SoundSeen, which appears to be a loose collective consisting, at this time anyway, of two engaging actors, Brenda Aoki and Sachiko Nakamura, both trained in modern dance and in traditional Japanese noh and kyogen theater techniques, and two versatile and proficient jazz musicians, bassist Mark Izu and alto saxophonist Lewis Jordan, both members of United Front. *Type O*, the product of their coordinated efforts, is just what one might hope for from the union of such diverse backgrounds: a witty, lyrical, laid-back zen jazz parable, a union of Asian- and Afro-American performance techniques and sensibilities in a Euro-American format, relating the delightful tale of one woman's eve-of-execution search for satori (enlightenment).

Sachiko Nakamura plays Sachiko, a young woman who, we are informed by a bluesy trio of the other performers at the play's opening, has been sentenced to death for tormenting her grandmother, beheading her sensei, or maybe for some other offense. Brenda Aoki, Mark Izu, and Lewis Jordan play the Satori Soldiers, a musical trio of enlightenment-pushers ("We deal in enlightenment. We are full of it") who take Sachiko back through a series of flashbacks to the events that led her to her current plight—all as part of a quest for (what else?) enlightenment.

So we see Sachiko as a grandmother-tormentor, the mischievous young girl whose obstinate persistence in assimilation (she insists that her name is Yvonne) drives her grandmother to distraction, who persecutes the older woman with images of Godzilla, and whose sacrilegious activities in their local Zen Baptist church result in Grandma's untimely demise. We see her sentenced to life on probation for grandmother slaughter, forbidden to associate with street musicians, and assigned a Noh Guardian (the sensei)—only to break the terms of her probation and, in a wonderfully funny stylized martial arts lesson, commit the sensei beheading for which she has been sentenced to death. And at the end of this whole lightly absurdist mystical musical saga, we get to share in Sachiko's enlightenment, learn the Big Answer to the meaning of life—an answer that somehow incorporates both the notion that physical life is just an illusion with advocacy of rebellion and praise for "the universal donor" (that's O, if you know your blood types).

The straightforward fable, beautiful in its simplicity, is fleshed out with some deft performances, Izu and Jordan's blues and jazz score (with occasional riffs borrowed from nursery rhymes and hymns, plus bits of Horace Silver, Archie Shepp, and Zeami, the 14th century Japanese actor/dancer who is generally regarded as the developer of noh drama), and the inventive sight gags and finely tuned comic directing of Jael Weisman, longtime director with the Dell'Arte Players. Weisman infuses the proceedings with a gentle, comic book-like exaggerated style—an effect beautifully sustained by Lydia Tanji's simple, imaginative props and costumes, an assortment of odd helmets, toys, outsized bows, etcetera, in a black and gray with pink and silver highlights motif.

At the center of the whole proceedings, Nakamura radiates a kind of benumbed calm (if such a state may be said to radiate) as Sachiko awaits execution in the opening scene, then suddenly metamorphoses into her engagingly obnoxious child-self and proceeds to grow through one scene after another back to the state in which she began. Brenda Aoki turns in a tour de force of cameo caricatures, appearing first as a steely calm Satori Soldier, then as the feisy, doddering, fiercely traditional, and ultimately overwhelmed Grandma, dashing off quick sketches of a Good Girl so sweet she'd cause tooth decay and a streetwise Teeny Bopper, and then outdoes them all with her portrayal of the taciturn, supremely self-confident and composed, officious Sensei. Lewis Jordan not only plays a mean sax—sweet and mellow, sharp and staccato, richly complex, as the mood demands—he also demonstrates great skill as a comic performer with his laid-back deadpan characterizations of Death, a street musician, a cool Latino Sonoma Vice cop, and, above all, the Zen Baptist Preacher delivering a hilarious sermon of zen koans and one-handed rounds of applause for God. Mark Izu is on somewhat less sure ground as an actor, but he more than makes up for that with his superb bass playing, especially as the street musician who lets his instrument do all his talking for him.

Type O is now on its second go-round in the area; it played at the Ohana Cultural Center in Oakland for one weekend last May, then went back into the shop for some fine tuning by Weisman and company. The play reopened and ran all through September in San Francisco's Studio Eremos and is now back at Ohana for just two more weekends. Don't miss it.

THEATER

'Seven Steps To Go' Could Go All The Way

By Margo Skinner

"Like a breath of fresh air" says Robert Hurwitt in the "Image" section of the Sunday *Chronicle-Examiner* (10/4). "There's something invigorating about a multi-ethnic theater company that combines Zen philosophy with jazz motifs," writes Bernard Weiner (*Chronicle*, 10/9).

They are both referring to the remarkable performance group SoundSeen, whose third collaboration, "Seven Steps to Go" is currently playing in San Francisco.

The new work finds perfect central symbolism in the ancient game of Go, which reportedly originated in China as early as 2356 B.C. and came to Japan about 500 A.D.

The seven steps of the game suggest Zen koans, referring not only to game moves but teaching social lesson and, most significant, a path to personal spiritual integration. "In the beginning, the board is empty" may speak of the consciousness of an infant. "First one, then the other" perhaps denotes a growing sense of individuality and difference. "Liberty and capture" has surely much relevance to the battle of inner and outer life.

The game's use is central to "Seven Steps," lends a firm organization to the work, and its final step provides a real feeling of reconciliation.

Pretty heavy stuff of a one-hour "performance cabaret comedy"? Theater-goers shouldn't be put off by this, for "Seven Steps to Go" is, like SoundSeen's earlier works, a joy, full of magical scenic tricks, wonderful music, fine choreography and delightful performances by its talented foursome.

They are the two fine feminine leads, Brenda Wong Aoki and Sachiko Nakamura -- actresses, dancers, choreographers, singers, and mimes -- and the extraordinarily talented musicians and actors, Mark Izu and Lewis Jordan. Nakamura portrays the to the "go dojo" of Gomaster Jordan and after a variety of experiences finds personal fulfillment in a sensitive, touching and ultimately triumphant performance.

Musician Jordan, who plays the most beautiful saxophone I've ever heard, has lots of charisma as the Gomaster.

The vivid Aoki is particularly delightful as Tanya, a member of the militant Blackstone family, and Ma of the redneck Whitmans. Too, her dancing with Nakamura, with its combination of East and West, is fine.

Izu plays bass, flute and harmonica, and makes them all voices of characters. As the shy youth who eventually joins with the young girl of a rival family, he once more reveals his acting talent.

The basic "special effect" of the performance piece is the Go board, luminescent white squares on the black-lit stage, with a heroine reminiscent of Alice in Wonderland who sinks to piece size upon it.

Jael Weisman, Commedia Dell'Arte director who worked with the S.F. Mime Troupe on "The Dragon Lady's Revenge," handles his talent expertly. Dale Ericson did "scene and construction" most economically and effectively. Lighting designer Patty-Anne Farrell knew just what she was doing and lent much to the hyper-reality of the work. Music by Izu, with witty lyrics by Jordan and Weisman is first rate.

About three quarters through the piece seemed to drag a bit, though only briefly. One had the feeling that, even though only an hour piece, a brief intermission might have helped.

But this is only a minor criticism. "Seven Steps to Go" is so dense and rich, moving on so many layers of meaning that it serves, like all first-rate theater or literature, to create its own world.

My intuition tells me that SoundSeen has nowhere to go but up; that within two years the company will make Broadway, and perhaps beyond.

"Seven Steps to Go" continues at the Intersection for the Arts, 766 Valencia St. (at 18th St.), San Francisco, through Oct. 24, with performances Weds.-Sats., 8 p.m. Phone (415) 626-3311 for tickets, information.

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Brenda Wong Aoki, Mark Izu, Lewis Jordan and Sachiko Nakamura in "Seven Steps To Go"

SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE

Fresh Blend Of Jazz And Zen

BY BERNARD WEINER

There's something invigorating about a multi-ethnic theater company that combines Zen philosophy with jazz motifs.

SoundSeen is a young Bay Area troupe composed of an Asian American bass player (Mark Izu), an Afro American jazz saxophonist (Lewis Jordan), two Asian American actresses/choreographers trained in modern dance and noh and kyogen techniques (Sachiko Nakamura, Brenda Wong Aoki), whose shows are staged by a director out of the commedia dell'arte tradition (Jael Weisman).

Their shows, such as last season's "Type O," tend to examine modern society with a hip sensibility and tongue placed firmly in cheek.

SoundSeen's new play, "Seven Steps to Go," is more in the nature of a social/psychological allegory centered around the ancient Japanese board game Go.

There are jokes aplenty in this collectively derived script — unfolded with constant jazz exclamations and embellishments (Izu on bass and harmonica, Jordan on a sweet sax) — but the major thrust is serious. A woman (Nakamura), eager for a sense of discipline in her confused life, arrives at a "Go dojo" to study the board game with a Go master (Jordan).

Self-Discovery

Her lessons in the "seven steps to Go" expose both Nakamura's growth as her character learns to incorporate various aspects of herself into a solid, secure personality, and also reveal relevant social dichotomies.

The two warring factions here are referred to as the Whitmans and the Blackstones — named after the White stones and the Black stones of the game — but they could be the Montagues and Capulets, Russians and Americans, or blacks and whites. Using Go's seven steps ("Liberty and Capture," "Ko: Rule of War," "Life and Death: Two Eyes," etc.), we are shown how futile and counter-productive is the repetitive hostility between conflicting groups. We are shown, also by using the Zen-like rules of the board game, that there are ways out other than violence.

The 60-minute show is engagingly staged, making the most of low-budget props, sets, costumes, black-lighting and hand-puppets. Weisman skillfully weaves the four performers into a wide variety of roles — 12 to be exact.

There are times when Weisman could jack up the presentation a bit, especially at moments when the script bogs down, but, on the whole, this is a delightfully entertaining production, enlivened by the performers' obvious enjoyment in presenting it.

Strong Performers

Jordan and Aoki are the two most secure, well-rounded performers — in acting, dance and music — with Nakamura and Izu appearing less certain as actors. But they compensate in other areas: Nakamura in movement and with her most expressive face, Izu with his expert playing.

"Seven Steps to Go" does not have a lot to say that is new — after all, self-discovery is as old as the word "go" — but it approaches the subject in new, innovative ways, and that's a lot these days.

Any show that ends with Zen-jazz prescriptions for self-realization — such as "C," "C-sharp" and "B-natural" — is worth checking out.

It's at Intersection for the Arts, 766 Valencia Street, through October 24.

The script is full of outrageous, pleasantly tortured puns, as many of them musical as Go-related. But the music, though integrated into the plot (the Whitmans play a comical country and western song, the Blackstones rally around the blues and "Amazing Grace" brings the lovers together), is more limited than in "Type O." There's little room for Jordan and Izu to demonstrate their impressive skills on saxophone and bass.

The game of Go has probably never been more divertingly explicated than it is by Jordan and Nakamura on Dale Ericson's clever set. But for all its wonderfully witty moments, "Seven Steps" feels constrained by its story. At this point in its development, it still has several steps to go.

Go

From F-16

seems more diffuse in its focus and less polished in performance.

"Type O," created by the performers with director Jael Weisman (best known for his work with the Dell'Arte Players), played with Buddhist concepts of illusion and reality in the tale of a woman (Nakamura) who had humiliated her grandmother to death and beheaded her martial arts teacher. The absurdity of the story was as delightful as its fragmented presentation and succession of sharply drawn, comic characters.

"Seven Steps," principally written by Jordan and Weisman, tells a more linear and less well developed tale, based on the basic rules of the ancient Chinese game of Wei Ch'i — known as "Go" in Japan, where it has been a major national pastime for a thousand years.

A young woman (Nakamura) goes to the Go Dojo, hoping that learning the game will help her sort out her life. The Go Master (Jordan), in a wonderfully theatrical use of black light and puppetry, transports her into the middle of a Go board, where she undergoes a series of adventures rather like Alice's on the chessboard of "Through the Looking Glass."

Unfortunately, the white and black stones of Go don't lend themselves as easily to characterization as do chessmen. SoundSeen turns the game's pieces into rival groups, the Whitmans (a family of racist hillbillies) and Blackstones (a militant black gang), and takes the obvious racial conflict a few steps beyond into a split between the two halves of one self. But the device is only partially realized.

As delightful as it is to see a romance between a black girl and white boy portrayed by Asian actors, few of the characters emerge even as clearly defined caricatures — the exceptions being Aoki's militant Tania and feisty Ma Whitman and Izu's bumptious Junior. Jordan's Go Master is but a pale reminder of his superb Zen Baptist preacher in "Type O," Nakamura's Student more a plot device than a character.

San Francisco Examiner
Image
The Magazine of Northern California
OCTOBER 4, 1987

Zen Jazz Theater: SoundSeen Is Back

What do you get when you mix an Asian-American bass player from Sunnyvale with an Afro-American Chicago jazz saxophonist and two choreographer/actresses trained in modern dance and noh and kyogen theater techniques? You get a group called SoundSeen that creates musical parables with a kind of Zen jazz sensibility. Throw in a director with a penchant for commedia dell'arte absurdities, and you get one of the freshest and funniest new groups in the San Francisco entertainment landscape.

According to Brenda Wong Aoki, an actress and singer who has appeared with the Theatre of Yugen and in the recently released *Living on Tokyo Time*, the members of the group have been working together in various combinations for years. The other members of the group include Asian-American Dance Collective founder Sachiko Nakamura, saxaphonist/composer Lewis Jordan and bassist Mark Izu of the modern jazz group United Front.

"We all came together about four years ago on one of Lewis's pieces," Aoki recalls, "and it worked out so well we decided we should do it more regularly." They called their new group SoundSeen, debuting in 1985 with an improvisationally developed piece entitled *The Land of Oohs and Aahs*. "We each had our own core style," says Aoki, "and we liked the idea of putting it all together and coming up with a format that was different from a traditional musical but had all of those elements of music and dance and theater—something more refreshing, very simple and performer-intensive."

Philip Kaske

A story based on the game of go.

As they developed their next piece, the group cast about for a director. They came up with Jael Weisman, a longtime director with the Dell'Arte Players and a former member of the San Francisco Mime Troupe. In May 1986, SoundSeen opened its second show, *Type O*, a wonderfully witty amalgamation of eclectic bluesy riffs, Zen-Baptist sermons, visual puns and martial arts mishaps that quickly became a modest underground hit, moving from a small studio at Project Artaud to repeated runs on both sides of the Bay.

Seven Steps to Go, SoundSeen's newest collective creation, opens Wednesday at Intersection for the Arts. The story is another of the group's tongue-in-cheek parables, this time based on the Japanese board game of go. "There's a woman, Sachiko, who is totally stressed out," Aoki explains. "She's tried all these kinds of therapy, so she goes to a go master, Lewis, to try to find a balance through go. He casts a spell on her and she finds herself transported to the go board, kind of like Alice in Wonderland."

Once on the go board, the woman gets involved with its inhabitants—a patriarchal family, the Ivorys, and a matriarchal gang called the Blackstones, which represent the white and black stones of the game. "She experiences life as it is on both sides," adds Jordan. "There's a theme in there somewhere that says you have to know yourself and balance the forces."

As in *Type O*, each of the four SoundSeen performers will play several different roles as the heroine moves through the seven stages of the game. Jordan and Izu have composed a score that draws on Jordan's Chicago blues background, Izu's study of *gagaku* and other Asian music forms and their shared jazz roots—"People like Mingus, Ornette Coleman, the Art Ensemble and Roland Kirk," says Jordan.

At a time when increasing numbers of Bay Area theater companies are striving to broaden their ethnic makeup and develop theater that's more representative of American society at large, SoundSeen's blend of Afro-, Asian- and Euro-American influences is like a breath of fresh air. And it's all the more refreshing in a group that's clearly not working along self-consciously premeditated demographic lines. "We haven't come up with a tried-and-true scientific formula," Aoki shrugs. "We're still at that beautiful idealistic stage where we just do things that inspire us."

SoundSeen's Seven Steps to Go *opens October 7 and runs through October 24 at Intersection for the Arts, 766 Valencia Street. Performances will take place Wednesdays through Saturdays at 8 p.m. For tickets and information, call 626-3311.*

ROBERT HURWITT

San Francisco Examiner , Friday, October 9, 1987

Members of SoundSeen cast in 'Seven Steps to Go'

By Robert Hurwitt
SPECIAL TO THE EXAMINER

IF NOTHING succeeds like success, nothing can be quite so hard an act to follow — especially for the artist whose first work struck the eye and ear as a fresh new vision. The effort to repeat or surpass that success is fraught with pitfalls; in the memory-enhanced glow of the first work, partial success becomes disappointment.

This second-time-out factor recently struck Tony Pellegrino, whose "The Kayaker," for all its many strengths, failed to live up to the expectations raised by his remarkably lyrical "Deer Rose" two seasons earlier. The same factor has now hit SoundSeen, the fledgling group whose new work, "Seven Steps to Go," opened Wednesday at Intersection for the Arts.

Not that "Seven Steps to Go" is bereft of its share of enchanting moments and the wonderfully wry humor that characterizes the group's best work. It just doesn't live up to the promise of "Type O," the cleverly eclectic Zen Baptist fable of one woman's quest for *satori* (enlightenment) with which SoundSeen delighted audiences on both sides of the Bay last year.

Once again, the small collective — Brenda Aoki, Mark Izu, Lewis Jordan and Sachiko Nakamura — is pursuing its unique blend of Afro- and Asian-American cultural influences to create what can best be described as a tongue-in-cheek Zen jazz parable. But this time the work seems more diffuse in its focus and less polished in performance.

"Type O," created by the performers with director Jael Weisman (best known for his work with the Dell'Arte Players), played with Buddhist concepts of illusion and reality in the tale of a woman (Nakamura) who had humiliated her grandmother to death and beheaded her martial arts teacher. The absurdity of the story was as delightful as its fragmented presentation and succession of sharply drawn, comic characters.

"Seven Steps," principally written by Jordan and Weisman, tells a more linear and less well developed tale, based on the basic rules of the ancient Chinese game of Wei Ch'i — known as "Go" in Japan, where it has been a major national pastime for a thousand years.

A young woman (Nakamura) goes to the Go Dojo, hoping that learning the game will help her sort out her life. The Go Master (Jordan), in a wonderfully theatrical use of black light and puppetry, transports her into the middle of a Go board, where she undergoes a series of adventures rather like Alice's on the chessboard of "Through the Looking Glass."

Unfortunately, the white and black stones of Go don't lend themselves as easily to characterization as do chessmen. SoundSeen turns the game's pieces into rival groups, the Whitmans (a family of racist hillbillies) and Blackstones (a militant black gang), and takes the obvious racial conflict a few steps beyond into a split between the two halves of one self. But the device is only partially realized.

As delightful as it is to see a romance between a black girl and white boy portrayed by Asian actors, few of the characters emerge even as clearly defined caricatures — the exceptions being Aoki's militant Tania and feisty Ma Whitman and Izu's bumptious Junior. Jordan's Go Master is but a pale reminder of his superb Zen Baptist preacher in "Type O," Nakamura's Student more a plot device than a character.

The script is full of outrageous, pleasantly tortured puns, as many of them musical as Go-related. But the music, though integrated into the plot (the Whitmans play a comical country and western song, the Blackstones rally around the blues and "Amazing Grace" brings the lovers together), is more limited than in "Type O." There's little room for Jordan and Izu to demonstrate their impressive skills on saxophone and bass.

The game of Go has probably never been more divertingly explicated than it is by Jordan and Nakamura on Dale Ericson's clever set. But for all its wonderfully witty moments, "Seven Steps" feels constrained by its story. At this point in its development, it still has several steps to go.

THEATER REVIEW
'Seven Steps to Go'
By SoundSeen
Director: Jael Weisman
Cast: Brenda Aoki, Mark Izu, Lewis Jordan, Sachiko Nakamura
Theater: Intersection for the Arts, Wednesday through Saturday through Oct. 24 (626-3311)
Evaluation: ★ ★ ½

October 23, 1987 ASIAN WEEK

'Seven Steps To Go' Could Go All The Way

By Margo Skinner

"Like a breath of fresh air" says Robert Hurwitt in the "Image" section of the Sunday *Chronicle-Examiner* (10/4). "There's something invigorating about a multi-ethnic theater company that combines Zen philosophy with jazz motifs," writes Bernard Weiner (*Chronicle*, 10/9).

They are both referring to the remarkable performance group SoundSeen, whose third collaboration, "Seven Steps to Go" is currently playing in San Francisco.

The new work finds perfect central symbolism in the ancient game of Go, which reportedly originated in China as early as 2356 B.C. and came to Japan about 500 A.D.

The seven steps of the game suggest Zen koans, referring not only to game moves but teaching social lesson and, most significant, a path to personal spiritual integration. "In the beginning, the board is empty" may speak of the consciousness of an infant. "First one, then the other" perhaps denotes a growing sense of individuality and difference. "Liberty and capture" has surely much relevance to the battle of inner and outer life.

The game's use is central to "Seven Steps," lends a firm organization to the work, and its final step provides a real feeling of reconciliation.

Pretty heavy stuff of a one-hour "performance cabaret comedy"? Theater-goers shouldn't be put off by this, for "Seven Steps to Go" is, like SoundSeen's earlier works, a joy, full of magical scenic tricks, wonderful music, fine choreography and delightful performances by its talented foursome.

They are the two fine feminine leads, Brenda Wong Aoki and Sachiko Nakamura -- actresses, dancers, choreographers, singers, and mimes -- and the extraordinarily talented musicians and actors, Mark Izu and Lewis Jordan. Nakamura portrays the young woman seeker, who, after trying many paths, finally goes to the "go dojo" of Gomaster Jordan and after a variety of experiences finds personal fulfillment in a sensitive, touching and ultimately triumphant performance.

Musician Jordan, who plays the most beautiful saxophone I've ever heard, has lots of charisma as the Gomaster.

The vivid Aoki is particularly delightful as Tanya, a member of the militant Blackstone family, and Ma of the redneck Whitmans. Too, her dancing with Nakamura, with its combination of East and West, is fine.

Brenda Wong Aoki, Mark Izu, Lewis Jordan and Sachiko Nakamura in "Seven Steps To Go"

Izu plays bass, flute and harmonica, and makes them all voices of characters. As the shy youth who eventually joins with the young girl of a rival family, he once more reveals his acting talent.

The basic "special effect" of the performance piece is the Go board, luminescent white squares on the black-lit stage, with a heroine reminiscent of Alice in Wonderland who sinks to piece size upon it.

Jael Weisman, Commedia Dell'Arte director who worked with the S.F. Mime Troupe on "The Dragon Lady's Revenge," handles his talent expertly. Dale Ericson did "scene and construction" most economically and effectively. Lighting designer Patty-Anne Farrell knew just what she was doing and lent much to the hyper-reality of the work. Music by Izu, with witty lyrics by Jordan and Weisman is first rate.

About three quarters through the piece seemed to drag a bit, though only briefly. One had the feeling that, even though only an hour piece, a brief intermission might have helped.

But this is only a minor criticism. "Seven Steps to Go" is so dense and rich, moving on so many layers of meaning that it serves, like all first-rate theater or literature, to create its own world.

My intuition tells me that SoundSeen has nowhere to go but up; that within two years the company will make Broadway, and perhaps beyond.

"Seven Steps to Go" continues at the Intersection for the Arts, 766 Valencia St. (at 18th St.), San Francisco, through Oct. 24, with performances Weds.-Sats., 8 p.m. Phone (415) 626-3311 for tickets, information.